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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RANGOON 000181

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STATE FOR EAP, PRM, AND IO; PACOM FOR FPA

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TAGS: PGOV PREL BM

SUBJECT: BURMA'S LEAST WANTED: THE ROHINGYAS

REF: A. 06

1B. RANGOON 235

1C. 06 RANGOON 1722

Classified By: P/E Chief Leslie Hayden for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (SBU) Summary: The Muslim Rohingyas who inhabit Burma's Northern Rakhine State (NRS) are among the world's most oppressed and marginalized people. Burma's military regime refuses to recognize the Rohingyas as one of Burma's official ethnic groups, denies them citizenship, and systematically extorts and persecutes them. The regime denies the Rohingyas permission to travel freely from village to village, stifling their ability to earn a living. The repressive military/police agency charged with overseeing the Rohingyas uses an "agent" system, assigning ethnic Burmans or Buddhist Rakhines to each village to monitor and extort the local residents. Virtually captive in a small portion of their native land, many Rohingyas suffer from malnutrition and communicable diseases, and food security remains a major issue in a region that suffers frequent flooding, drought, and brushfires. Only the UN and international NGOs do anything to protect these stateless people and alleviate their misery. End summary.

The Rohingyas

12. (SBU) UNHCR recently organized a trip to Northern Rakhine State for diplomats to view UN and INGO operations to assist Rohingyas. Fleeing intense oppression in Burma, hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas fled west in the 1960s and 1970s, and 250,000 more fled NRS for Bangladesh in 1991 and 1992. In 1994, UNHCR established operations in NRS to facilitate the repatriation and reintegration of Rohingya returnees from refugee camps in the Cox's Bazaar region of Bangladesh after Burma's ruling regime agreed to accept them back. Nearly 235,000 Rohingyas have since returned to NRS with UNHCR assistance - roughly 95 percent of those who fled. In 2006, UNHCR began to shift its focus in NRS to concentrate more on protecting the entire Muslim population in NRS (Ref A), in an attempt to improve their legal status and minimize the likelihood of any future emigration. UNHCR also maintains a minimum capacity for repatriation in order to assist any of the remaining 28,000 Rohingya refugees who still remain in

the refugee camps in Bangladesh.

NaSaKa

¶3. (C) In addition to the traditional government Peace and Development Council administrative system, NRS is tightly controlled by the Border Immigration Headquarters, known by its Burmese acronym NaSaKa. NaSaKa reports to the Western Regional Commander and has repression down to a fine art. In NRS there is one NaSaKa officer for every one hundred villagers. Under former Prime Minister Khin Nyunt, NaSaKa was staffed and controlled by military intelligence officers loyal to the Prime Minister. When he was ousted, many NaSaKa officials were replaced with less-experienced officers and their power structure diminished. UNHCR told us the new officers are now fully up to speed and are once again ramping up the level of repression and corruption in NRS.

¶4. (C) NaSaKa controls all movement of the Rohingyas in NRS and also issues all valid birth and marriage certificates. In order to effectively control the Rohingyas, NaSaKa appoints either an ethnic Burman or Buddhist Rakhine "agent" in each village and hamlet to keep tabs on the population. These agents not only act as spies for NaSaKa, but they use their positions to enrich themselves through extortion. Since there are few employment opportunities for the mostly illiterate Rohingyas, many men earn their living by traveling to nearby forests to cut and sell bamboo. Restricted from leaving their home villages, the Rohingyas must pay the agents a fee each time they depart the village to cut bamboo. They are also required to pay the agents a yearly tax on their earnings. During two separate instances of unmonitored

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conversations, Rohingya women complained to us about the agent system in their villages. In addition to the agents, regime immigration officers visit every Rohingya house once every six months to check immigration documents. The officers usually demand a "fee" from the families during these visits, in addition to heavy bribes to register new marriages and births in their papers. NaSaKa also controls large groves of cashew trees in NRS and uses the labor of local villagers to harvest the nuts. The local officials regularly subject the Rohingyas to forced labor for portage, road repair, and anything else the authorities should need.

Destroying Mosques

¶5. (C) During our trip we had a chance to talk with Dr. Tin Aung, Chairman of the Islamic Council in Maungdaw, and U Than Tun, Chairman of the Myanmar Muslim Association in Maungdaw. Both men said that regime authorities ordered the destruction of seven mosques last year in Buthidaung and another two in Maungdaw, two of the three townships comprising NRS. The Muslim officials said NaSaKa officials added insult to injury by requiring local mosque members to destroy the buildings themselves. Other mosques are arbitrarily declared "off-limits" by NaSaKa and stand empty because worshipers are forbidden from entering them. Immigration officials became visibly upset on our trip when the Bangladesh and Malaysia Ambassadors stopped to visit a particularly beautiful mosque at one of our stops.

Foreign Assistance

¶6. (U) UNHCR gears its activities in NRS toward protecting local residents, and focuses on promoting self-reliance and integration for the Rohingyas. It is the lead agency for humanitarian assistance in NRS and coordinates the activities of several INGO partners. Among them are FAO, UNDP, UNICEF, WFP, WHO, Action Contre la Faim (ACF), Aide Medicale Internationale (AMI), AZG (MSF Holland), CARE, GRET, ICRC,

and Malteser. UNHCR-funded implementing partners in NRS are Bridge Asia Japan, Community and Family Services International (based in the Philippines), the Immigration and National Registration Department (IND), and the Myanmar Red Cross.

¶7. (SBU) Fundamental to UNHCR's NRS strategy are its Burmese language training classes and its community centers. The majority of Rohingyas in NRS do not speak either Burmese or Rakhine, but a dialect of Bengali for which there is no written script. UNCHR is working to reduce the isolation of the Rohingyas by training them to communicate in Burmese and preparing their children for enrollment in the public school system. The language training is also a basis for improving the Rohingya's legal status, since knowledge of a national language is a prerequisite for citizenship. UNHCR also uses the curriculum to teach the women to interact directly with local authorities, including practical guidance for completing local birth and marriage registration procedures. Lessons on gender roles and equality and literacy curriculum that includes human rights awareness, child care education, reproductive health awareness, and HIV/AIDS information are also included.

¶8. (SBU) One of the most impressive projects we visited was a local community center where UNHCR has enlisted the support of the local Imam to encourage women to receive vocational training and learn community interaction skills. Women attending these centers receive instruction in gardening, sewing, and HIV/AIDS awareness. The centers also host regular community meetings where UNHCR workers use role play exercises to strengthen the Rohingyas' skills for maintaining their communities and interacting with the local authorities. One of the instructors told us a favorite tool in these meetings is a book the Embassy donated to the center on a previous visit, entitled "The Mosques of New York." Community center members, most who have never traveled beyond

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the immediate area, are intently interested in the pictures of the large mosques and the instructors use the book as an illustration of how mosque life can strengthen and unite a community.

¶9. (SBU) One of UNHCR's key projects, and one for which they have requested USG funding, is their Temporary Registration Certificate (TRC) project. The majority of Rohingyas in NRS are not entitled to hold National Registration Cards because the GOB does not recognize them as citizens of Burma. Instead, many Rohingyas hold TRCs, a legal document that proves the cardholders' legal residence in Myanmar. UNHCR estimates that over 150,000 Rohingyas do not even possess TRCs. Without these cards, the regime can restrict almost all their travel and make it extremely difficult for them to register births and marriages. UNHCR's proposed project aims to work with the IND to issue TRCs to Rohingyas free of charge. Possessing TRC cards will also facilitate citizenship should it ever become politically possible.

Obstacles

¶10. (C) One of the biggest obstacles to providing assistance to the Rohingyas in NRS is the restriction of rice movements throughout the area. WFP operates a food for education program in local primary schools to provide incentive to the Rohingyas to send their children to school rather than keep them at home to work. Each child receives ten kilos of rice for each month he/she attends school. The program has been successful and, during the months rice has been available, school enrollment has tripled. Unfortunately, the regime requires the WFP to obtain a separate permit each time it transports rice to different points within NRS. When rice prices rise, permits are often refused. During 2006, WFP could only provide rice for four out of nine academic months. WFP told us they have repeatedly urged the regional

commander to facilitate more reliable future rice deliveries.

¶11. (C) UNHCR told us they have worked hard to develop trust and build a cooperative relationship with the IND, the Western Regional Commander, and local Muslim community leaders. Their local field monitoring teams keep regular tabs on the villagers and try to use the relationships they have developed with the IND to advocate greater freedom of movement for the Rohingyas and to facilitate official approvals for medical evacuations and access to educational institutions for the local population. They also monitor for indications of forced labor and demands by local officials for compulsory contributions of cash, poultry, and livestock from local villagers. UNCHR intervenes in the most egregious cases.

¶12. (SBU) Comment: UNCHR's presence in NRS provides the only real protection the Rohingyas have. Indeed, INGO activities in NRS appeared to be well run and well coordinated. What is startlingly absent are any USG funded activities. The French, the Germans, Japan, and the EU have visible flags and signs on their projects advertising their funding and involvement, but there is no sign of the U.S. there. While all of Burma suffers in relative poverty and fear, malnutrition and brutal repression is most palpably visible in NRS. The GOB allows greater access to humanitarian assistance here than most other areas of the country, so USG assistance can address the needs of the most oppressed people in Burma. PRM has indicated an interest in offering assistance, which this Embassy would be pleased to facilitate. End comment.

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